

## Zambia Social Science Journal

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Volume 4

Number 2 *Volume 4, Number 2 (November 2013)*

Article 6

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### Recommended Citation

Kajoba, Gear M. (2013) "Some Observations on the Agrarian Question in the Era of Economic Liberalisation in Sub-Saharan Africa: Which Way Forward?," *Zambia Social Science Journal*: Vol. 4 : No. 2 , Article 6.  
Available at: <http://scholarship.law.cornell.edu/zssj/vol4/iss2/6>

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# Some Observations on the Agrarian Question in the Era of Economic Liberalisation in sub-Saharan Africa: Which Way Forward?

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*This paper contributes to the debate on the way forward in sub-Saharan Africa with respect to the agrarian question in emerging markets under economic liberalisation. The point of departure is that since the peasantry is a temporary category which can be transformed into other social groups that can earn their living from incomes raised outside agriculture (such as from wage employment in mines, manufacturing industries, and the service sectors), not every rural dweller should be or is a farmer. Improved methods of cultivation especially with mechanisation, agricultural extension, entrepreneurship, and skills training and empowerment of women and youth; secure land tenure for collateral; infrastructure development to link farmers to markets; and finance can help a small proportion of the rural populations of Africa to graduate into commercial farmers who could produce enough food to feed the continent. The surplus population could be absorbed in wage employment in agro-processing industries, and in other value adding industries outside agriculture such as mineral processing, if Africa experiences industrial transformation. This is largely the experience of industrialised countries that have experienced such transformation in the last 50 years or so, the same period African countries have enjoyed political independence, but have lagged behind with respect to resolving the agrarian question.*

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## Introduction

The purpose of writing this concept note on the agrarian question is to contribute to the debates at the Indaba Agricultural Policy Research Institute (IAPRI), on the place of small-holder farmers with respect to the development of agriculture to ensure household and national food security and the reduction of rural poverty. Thus, the article provides the context of the debates at IAPRI, it deals with the conceptualisation that the peasantry or small-holders should be perceived as being a temporary category within the framework of agricultural transformation. The article looks at the opening up effect of foreign investment; the issue and place of agricultural land tenure, and what African countries can learn from recent developments from the Asian Tigers and others elsewhere.

With respect to methods, the concept note is based on the review of literature that the author has perused over a period of time as he searches for possible solutions to contribute to the resolution of the many challenges that the African continent faces and in the course of teaching courses on the development geography of Africa at the University of Zambia (Kajoba, 1997; Kajoba, 2001).

### *The Context of the Debates at IAPRI*

The debates begun around 2001 when colleagues from Michigan State University (MSU) who were part of the Food Security Research Project that was the forerunner to Indaba Agricultural Policy Research Institute (IAPRI) presented arguments with respect to land distribution and government support or interventions to small-holder farmers in a number of African countries such as Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Mozambique, and Zambia. It was pointed out that land holding size was strongly associated with household income for land holding between 0 to 1.25 ha.

(Jayne et al., 2001); and that in Zambia and other African countries, improving access to land among the most land constrained small-holder households would directly reduce poverty. Land access per household in Zambia by 1999/2000 for the bottom 25% of the population was 0.6 ha., as compared to the top 25% of the population with 8.85 ha., and the national mean of 3.05 ha. (CSO, 2001). Therefore, MSU proposed that there should be land redistribution in the country to deal with this unequal concentration of land. With respect to government intervention, it was argued that it was benefitting richer rather than poorer farmers and that focus should shift to the lower and poorer categories of rural producers at the bottom of the economic ladder.

Thus, in the discussions concerning these matters in one of the seminars in August 2012, the Zambian group led by the IAPRI chairperson, presented a different viewpoint in which it was countered that while it was imperative that African governments are expected to assist small-holder farmers, especially those that are vulnerable but viable, in order to improve and increase food production and reduce rural poverty. It was not correct for researchers to assume that every rural dweller is or should be a farmer. It was at this point that the author of this concept note was requested by the IAPRI chairman to prepare a position paper that would articulate this counter-veiling point of view.

### **The Peasantry/small-holders are a Temporary Category**

In this concept note, it is necessary to state right from the outset that rural producers in sub-Saharan Africa, who are referred to variously as small-holder farmers or as subsistence farmers, constitute a peasantry group that is expected to grow and graduate from being small-scale farmers who produce largely for home consumption, to those who produce a surplus for sale on the market. Lombard and Tweedie (1972) designated such farmers in Zambia as emergent farmers, who marketed at least 50% of their harvest in each agricultural season.

Furthermore, these 'graduates' should in due course be able to expand their holdings; adopt modern advanced technology such as ox-drawn ploughs, tractors, and irrigation equipment; utilise soil improvement techniques like cultivation of legumes, the use of green and cattle manure, fertilizers, and hybrid seeds; and practice crop rotation. They are expected to become large-scale commercial farmers who are able to create employment for those who are unable to earn a living through farming for themselves. The produce from such farms should be processed in rural agro-industries that are established by both local and external investors to add value, especially in emerging liberalised market economies in sub-Saharan Africa, such as that prevailing in Zambia.

But what should happen to those who remain trapped in economic activity that is dominated and is based only on subsistence production, the ones who Hyden (1986) refers to as those guided by the law of subsistence rather than by the law of value? It is most likely that such 'producers' are part of the bottom 25% of the population who hold an average of 0.61 ha. as stated above, and depend on the use of rudimentary tools such as axes and hoes and are likely to harvest only small quantities that cannot even support them up to the next harvest. Such individuals are probably not farmers per se, and it is proposed in this concept note that they need an exit option that can make it possible for them to earn a decent livelihood. Such individuals are probably better off if they can be transformed into farm workers or into a rural proletariat or wage earners in agro-based industries that should be established by investors. Instead of remaining trapped in such a subsistence existence, there is need to provide them with an exit option so that they escape such crushing rural poverty. This can be done by redirecting their labour (especially if provided with some basic education and skills training by the state) into more relatively productive occupations like industrial construction, real estate, and infrastructure construction of roads, railways, bridges, harbours, and airports. They would be

same as wage earners in the mines and related industries in which value can be added to mineral raw materials to produce industrial products as workers on agri-business farms and industries. In the tourism and transport sector or even as micro and small entrepreneurs in the informal sector in urban areas, they can engage in trading, carpentry and joinery, brick laying, and welding and other services. Support through access to micro-credit/finance can help such entrepreneurs grow their businesses.

Writing about agricultural transformation, Timmer (1988), contends that in market oriented economies, there is a strong link between agriculture and industrial growth. Improvements in agricultural production which lead to an increase in agricultural productivity ensures that more food is produced with much less manpower. Such manpower or surplus labour is subsequently released for capital construction leading to the growth of manufacturing industries as part of the industrial revolution. In a 2015 Zambia's Agricultural Budget Analysis Poster, the Indaba Agricultural Policy Research Institute made an interesting analysis, which revealed that only 2-5% of the smallholder farm households contribute the bumper maize harvests that the country has been experiencing, such as the 3.3 million metric tonnes produced in the 2013/14 agricultural season. The maize self-sufficiency that Zambia has seen in recent years is as a result of the contributions of only a small proportion of our farming households.

In other words, it can be argued that with increased soil improvement, mechanisation, irrigation, input provision, improved hybrid seeds of maize, sorghum, millets, and rice, the incorporation of root crops and agro forestry and provision of infrastructure to improve market linkages, and access to affordable agricultural credit, that they yield per hectare for the smallholder farmers can increase from 1-3 tons/ha. to that of between 5-10 tons/ha. for commercial farmers. Furthermore, only a small proportion of the farm households would be needed to produce enough staple maize and other cereals, fruit, and vegetables to feed the nation, ensure food security, and even export surpluses to neighbouring countries in order to earn foreign exchange through regional trade. This means that the energies of other farm households, those trapped in subsistence, with very small land holding sizes, and others who may not have interest in engaging in productive agriculture, would best be channelled into different activities to earn their livelihoods.

Writing about changing livelihood perception in South Africa, Bernstein (2005) points out that although many rural South Africans had emotional ties to the land, the situation has changed since the fall of apartheid. South Africans now increasingly think in terms of urban land opportunities and many would not choose agriculture as a career today. In another study, Herbinck and Van Averbeke (2007) state that in some parts of the Eastern Cape and possibly elsewhere in South Africa, the thrust towards agricultural based livelihoods is in retreat and there has been a shift to urban based industrial and government supported entitlements and livelihoods. Johnson and Mellor (1961) contend that there is a tendency to discuss issues in terms of a false dichotomy of agricultural versus industrial development. They argue that given the diversity among individual countries with respect to physical resource endowment, cultural heritage, and historical experiences, there is no universally applicable definition of the role that agriculture should play in the process of development. However, they go on to say that it is important to balance the role of agriculture and other sectors of the economy, especially with respect to direct government investment or interventions and budget allocations to research and agricultural extension and taxation.

Johnson and Mellor (1961) continue to point out that in many developing countries, about 40 to 60% of national income is produced in agriculture and about 50 to 80% of the labour force is engaged in agricultural production. These are very low levels of productivity, despite large quantities of resources in terms of labour and government financial support being committed to the sector. However, Johnson and Mellor (1961) state that a process of structural transformation takes place when improvements in modern technology reduce costs in the

manufacturing industry. Advances in industrial development increase per capita incomes (and the steady growth of the middle class), and this leads to substantial reduction in the share of agriculture. Thus, increase in the development of the level of manufacturing (i.e. value addition to the raw materials as part of the process of industrialisation to create jobs and wealth) contributes to a structural transformation of an economy that creates a necessary (and probably a sufficient) condition for cumulative and self-sustaining growth. In this process of economic transformation, Johnston and Mellor (1961) refer to the work of W. Arthur Lewis as having contended that there is a surplus of manpower in the subsistence sector of agriculture, and that the non-agricultural capitalist sector is the dynamic element, which absorbs this surplus of manpower (Johnston and Mellor, 1961: 568). The major challenge for developing countries, therefore, is to ensure that nonfarm job opportunities are created sufficiently rapidly to move ahead of population.

In the case of sub-Saharan African countries such as Zambia, industrial development that can contribute to improvements in the agricultural sector include, among other things, the adoption of appropriate agricultural technologies through mechanisation to help small-holder farmers (especially women) to cultivate more land efficiently. This would also involve encouraging them to practice conservation agriculture, to improve soil fertility through the use of legumes crop rotation, irrigation, and water conservation. They should also be encouraged to practice crop diversification to grow cereals like sorghum, millet, wheat, and soya beans in addition to maize (which is considered riskier due to droughts resulting from climate change). There is also need to incorporate agro-forestry, livestock production, aquaculture, and root crops like cassava, sweet potatoes, and yams to broaden the food base and produce more raw materials for agro-based industries (Ndandula, 2011; Nawa, 2015).

Thus, increased agricultural output and productivity can contribute to overall economic growth by providing food supplies for the increasing national populations to ensure household food security and nutrition as well as provide the necessary raw materials that can be processed in agro-industries in emerging markets. This can add value and create jobs, promote regional and international trade to earn foreign exchange, and raise the net cash incomes of farm rural population that should not only provide labour for the expanding manufacturing and other service sectors, but also provide an expanding market for industrial consumer products and services in the national, regional, and continental economies. Johnston and Mellor (1961) point out that according to W. Arthur Lewis, an increase in rural net cash income or purchasing power is a valuable stimulus to industrial development and by extension, this process can significantly contribute to the reduction of rural poverty and raise living standards in Africa.

With industrial transformation as the centre of our vision in Africa (i.e. Agenda 2063 or the Africa We Want), value addition to raw materials should be key to socio-economic development and job and wealth creation. In this way, there could be a small proportion of small and medium to larger scale commercial farmers, who can produce sufficient staple food and other economic/cash crops (raw materials) to feed the sub-region, while others can be transformed into a rural and urban industrial proletariat. In this regard, Hyden (1980) has observed that while in America and Europe the peasantry is virtually extinct (due to industrial transformation), the peasantry is captured and controlled by other social classes in Asia and South America. It is only in Africa where this category is still independent and free to do whatever it likes, especially since it has access to customary land without any obligations to the state or traditional authorities that control the land. In other words, it could be argued that with genuine industrial transformation, the peasantry as a category is supposed to be a temporary one that could be transformed into something else as we grapple to resolve the agrarian and development questions in Africa.

## **The Opening-up Effect**

In recent years, some sections of the academic community seem to be alarmed by the coming of foreign investors in Africa in the agricultural sector, and they have tended to perceive this trend as bad for the people who are seen as victims of large-scale land grabbing (see, The Oakland Institute, 2011). While there is need to be cautious about land allocation for investment to avoid large-scale displacement of the locals, it is equally necessary to welcome investment and see it as playing a positive role in opening-up land in remote and other areas where there is abundant land that is unoccupied or is under-utilised by the locals.

In Zambia, for instance, the government is establishing Farm Blocks in all the provinces, where it will provide land to both local and foreign investors to produce cash (including food) crops that will be processed by the major foreign investors in order to add value to the agricultural raw materials. The government is to provide the necessary infrastructure like roads, dams, and electric power. Land will be allocated in different amounts, but it seems the idea is to deal with the agrarian question as to what farm size is ideal. It is expected that all the three categories of small, medium, and large farms will be demarcated, hoping to resolve the perennial question as to what is the optimum farm size that can ensure efficiency. Thus, there will be a Triple Farm size combination, and the locals will benefit from securing employment and participation in out grower schemes that will provide a market for what is produced. For instance, in the Nansanga Farm Block in Serenje District, Mulenga (2011) shows that out of a total of 310 farms that have been demarcated, 83.5% of the farms would be between 10-50 ha. each, 13% would be between 51-250 ha. Each, and only 3.5% would be between 251-900 ha. each. In terms of gender, 63.9% of the farms are allocated to men, while women got 28.1%.

In my view, these efforts to establish Farm Blocks in which both the government and the private sector will be involved is a good attempt at promoting public-private partnerships in rural development, and it is a way of creating growth pole centres that have an opening-up effect in remote parts of the country that are sparsely populated.

## **The Issue and Place of Agricultural Land Tenure**

As land is made available for investment in commercial agricultural production, it is imperative that secure land tenure is guaranteed to both local and foreign investors. Furthermore, effort must be made to empower women small-holders, as the generative theme on this is that women farmers need to have access, ownership, and control over the land that they cultivate in traditional or customary areas as well (Wanyeki, 2003). In emerging market economies, both men and women and the youth need not only access to land, but also should enjoy secure tenure to guarantee their investments in labour, time, and effort as they endeavour to obtain credit from financial institutes using land as collateral to produce marketable surplus so as to earn agricultural incomes. (Kajoba, 1998; Kajoba, 2002). However, there should be provision for other tenure arrangements such as the availability for rented land where such circumstances permit in the context of land markets.

Although we have noted above the fact that the African peasantry is uncaptured by other social classes, the issue of tax is rather a sensitive issue. Instead of imposing a direct tax on land, which the small-holders cultivate, an indirect tax such as the maize levy could be ideal. Johnston and Mellor (1961) seem to suggest that tax on agriculture is one way in which a developing country can promote capital formation that is needed to expand investment and development in a market economy. Such capital formation is also needed for overhead investment in extension, research, and other development activities.



Efforts to resolve the agrarian question with respect to promotion of secure land tenure should be combined with the need to broadening the food base. Small-holders must be sensitised and assisted to diversify what crops to cultivate. The government, the private sector, the donor community, United Nations agencies, and multilateral organizations like the World Bank should promote agricultural diversification so that other cereals like rice, sorghum, millets, and root crops like cassava and sweet potatoes are brought back on the market as was the case before independence in Zambia. This would reduce the dependence on maize, which is more susceptible to drought, in view of climate change. There is need to interface traditional and scientific knowledge systems by promoting hybrids of the traditional crops that are drought tolerant, early maturing, high yielding, and are palatable, in order to ensure food security at the household, regional, and continental levels.

## **What Can Africa Learn from the Asian Tigers?**

As we grapple with how to resolve the agrarian question in Africa, some writers have suggested that we need to look to Asian Tigers (like South Korea, Taiwan, and even China) to see what we can learn from them (see Smith, 2001; Versi, 2011; and Amoako, 2011). One of the major lessons is that these Asian nations promote value addition or manufacturing to achieve rapid industrialisation within the general framework of market based economies. Thus, they promoted entrepreneurship and managed to borrow and domesticate western technology. In addition, much attention was made to construct infrastructure, like roads. Massive investment was also made in education in order to educate, train, and equip the population with necessary skills to sustain industrialisation.

It is argued further that the Asian Tigers achieved transformation through value addition by carefully balancing the roles of the state and that of the private sector. The state played a major role in supporting the private sector to attract investment from the West and promote manufacturing. In undertaking these efforts, it is pointed out that these Asian countries did not abandon their culture based on the teachings of Confucius, who among other things taught about the need for merit, hard work, obedience to authority, self-improvement through education, integrity, and discipline. Kangai (2014) argues that Africa can draw inspiration from China by reforming its economies, draw from her cultural heritage to regain self-confidence that can achieve greatness and industrialise.

## **Conclusion**

This article has taken the stand that in resolving the agrarian question in sub-Saharan Africa, the peasantry/small-holder farmers need to graduate and become large-scale commercial farmers that will have the responsibility of feeding Africa's population. On the other hand, the surplus population on small and uneconomic units of land need an exist option into wage employment to make it possible for them to earn non-farm incomes in order to sustain their livelihoods. This process requires undertaking socio-economic transformation through value addition to Africa's raw materials so as to promote manufacturing and industrialisation. It is further argued that large-scale investment in agriculture is not harmful, but good, as it has an opening-up effect in sparsely populated areas where land is under-utilised by the locals, who can benefit through employment and have access to markets that are established in out-grower schemes.

As Africa undertakes industrialisation, there is need to empower all the stake-holders, especially women, with secure land tenure to make it possible for them to have a sense of ownership and benefit from their labour on land within their local communities. The empowerment of women and the youth with secure tenure also requires sustained effort to

diversify what is produced in order to broaden the food base and ensure food security and nutrition, especially at household level. Finally, this article suggests that Africa can learn from what the Asian Tigers have managed to achieve in the past 50 to 60 years. During this period, the Tigers have experienced rapid industrialisation through value addition and the promotion of manufacturing, while Africa has largely lagged behind despite being well endowed with raw materials that continue to be exported and processed outside the continent.

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